

## **905 voters want more bike lanes; Survey finds residents want greener neighbourhoods, better public transit, stronger climate action**

The Toronto Star

October 14, 2022 Friday

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**Section:** NEWS; Pg. A11

**Length:** 694 words

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### **Body**

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For years, David Laing was one of the lone cyclists brave enough to bike the car-congested boulevards of Brampton.

Then during the pandemic, something changed, and Bramptonians started taking to their bikes like never before.

"People weren't able to do their normal exercise routines inside," said Laing. "It contributed to a significant spike in the demand for bicycles. And then demand for road space and for space on the trails."

The proportion of bike and walking trips more than doubled across Peel Region in the first year of COVID, a University of Toronto study found. Suddenly, it felt like bikes were everywhere.

As people across the GTA consider their vote in the upcoming municipal elections, new polling reflects a revolution in suburban attitudes toward activities traditionally associated with downtown dwellers.

In Scarborough and Etobicoke, 72 and 71 per cent of people said they wanted more protected bike lanes. In Richmond Hill and Brampton, support was even higher, at 82 per cent.

Rather than fixating on commute times, the poll shows that 905ers overwhelmingly want greener neighbourhoods, more bike lanes, better public transit and stronger climate action. The results undermine the stereotypes about suburban voters and what's important to them in a way that could change the dynamics of councils in Toronto and neighbouring cities.

"I think that the folks in Brampton are not dissimilar to folks in the core of the cities," said Laing, the chair of Bike Brampton, a community volunteer group. "Everybody wants their access to green space and everybody wants to have recreational opportunities that get them outside. And cycling is a wonderful way of doing that."

While trails in parks have long welcomed families on two wheels for weekend jaunts, the current push for bike lanes in the outer edges of Toronto and the suburbs represents a shift in the ways bikes are perceived: less recreational and more utilitarian, he said.

"The impact of inflation and economic circumstances have caused people to look for cheaper ways of getting around," said Laing. "They're turning to bicycles. And those are the forgotten folks. They're not in front of city council making depositions. But there is a significant number of them and they're the ones that need to have that infrastructure in place so that they can get to work."

Since 2019, Brampton has built more kilometres of bike lanes than in the previous 20 years combined, said Laing, and this taste of what it's like to bike without fear of cars has fuelled calls for more.

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"People are looking for less carbon-intensive modes of travel," he said. "I do believe that."

The polling, carried out by EKOS for the David Suzuki Foundation last month and shared with the Star, seems to bear this out.

Three-quarters of respondents wanted candidates to support greater protection of the Greenbelt, 80 per cent wanted more nature in their city and 62 per cent said they would be more likely to vote if candidates promised strong climate action.

While these attitudes are not what one might expect from a region defined by the three-car garage, they represent how much environmental issues have migrated to the suburbs, said Manju Sekhri, who chairs the community group Sustainable Milton. But politicians aren't keeping up with changing attitudes, she said.

"They built bike lanes, but no one uses them," said Sekhri. "Amenities aren't close enough. Proximity has to come first."

When it's two to five kilometres to get to the nearest store, and you have to ride alongside six lanes of speeding traffic with only a painted line to protect you, local officials need to think bigger to convince people to commute by bike, she said.

"Superficially, they're doing the right things. But they're not setting us up for success."

The poll also indicated that 70 per cent of people wanted increased funding for public transit.

"Nobody moves to the suburbs to ride the bus," said Sekhri. "But some people have no choice. Cars are becoming a luxury."

The automated telephone poll surveyed 862 people in Scarborough, Etobicoke, Richmond Hill, and Brampton in August and has a margin of error of three percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Journal Code:** TTA

**Subject:** BIKE LANES (91%); BICYCLE SAFETY (90%); BICYCLES (90%); CLIMATE ACTION (90%); POLLS & SURVEYS (90%); VOTERS & VOTING (90%); CITY GOVERNMENT (89%); CYCLING (89%); SUBURBS (89%); CITIES (88%); CITY LIFE (78%); COMMUTING (78%); ELECTIONS (77%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (75%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (74%); COVID CORONAVIRUS (73%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (72%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (72%); EXERCISE & FITNESS (72%); RESEARCH REPORTS (72%); VOLUNTEERS (64%)

**Industry:** BIKE LANES (91%); BICYCLE SAFETY (90%); BICYCLES (90%); MICROMOBILITY (89%)

**Geographic:** ONTARIO, CANADA (88%); CANADA (79%)

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**Load-Date:** October 14, 2022

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